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Integral Optimism

How to Approach our Epic Global Challenges with Informed Hope and Faith

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The reason why the universe is eternal is that it does not live for itself; it gives life to others as it transforms.” — Lao Tzu

Introduction

I am privileged to be a member of multiple progressive communities spanning the globe. These include spiritual, environmental, activist and other ‘enlightened’ groups—each sharing a concern, in their own way, for the future of humanity and our planet. I am regularly honored to participate in deep discussions with some of the brightest contemplatives, thought leaders, entrepreneurs, innovators, and change agents of our time. And everywhere I go, the consensus seems clear: our human species—and perhaps Planet Earth itself—is in serious trouble.

Global warming, nuclear proliferation, transcontinental pandemics, economic meltdown, weapons of mass destruction, overpopulation, extinctions, ethnic cleansing and genocide, poverty and starvation, ecological disasters—the nightmare list seems never-ending. Everyone seems to agree: something bad, and possibly catastrophic, is happening as we speak.

With this stark assessment of our collective situation comes a surprising range of attitudes and responses. Some are confident that we’ll be able to successfully navigate our way through these troubles without significant harm. Other, equally progressive thinkers are convinced that we’re on a course to annihilate all life on the planet. Some are keen to attack the most crucial issues head on—believing that we can save ourselves if we just roll up our sleeves and solve specific problems quickly enough. Meanwhile, others take a more detached stance, believing that the world will take care of itself (via God or Spirit’s will) and there may be nothing we can do to change it; so it’s best to focus on maximizing the awakening in our personal lives.

A special category of responses comes from those working within the new ‘Big Picture’ models and maps. These attempt to synthesize a wide range of strategies and insights—drawing on both spiritual wisdom and scientific research—and offer transformational tools to help individuals and organizations reach higher levels of awareness and functioning. Many Integral and Evolutionary advocates, along with other leading-edge thinkers, propose that with their potent practices, processes and mental models, the world can be successfully equipped to navigate our way through critical threats, without sustaining significant losses of human life or damage to vital institutions. The belief is that the adoption of these *meta-perspectives* by the right people in the right places will engender a shift in consciousness that cascades throughout society and culture in various transformative ways.

The purpose of this article is to question some of the assumptions behind these responses to our global crisis; show how they can sometimes skew our attitudes toward our own future and potentials; and discuss how we can move toward a more balanced and authentic sense of optimism—what I call ‘Integral Optimism.’ Within this overarching purpose, I have four related objectives:

- First, in the face of large-scale challenges, to identify inspired ways of cultivating our highest spiritual awareness. How can we best show up as we most fundamentally are: as One, as Self, as All-Pervading Spirit?

- Second, upon this foundation, to build and maintain a bridge between our precious separate-self sense and that absolute Self in which we are founded. This ‘both/and’ larger perspective will represent the basis of a mature and informed optimism.

- Third, to offer a practically optimistic way of re-authoring the narrative of our times, providing reason to feel hopeful about the prospects of life—not only surviving, but even *thriving* in more advanced forms in the time ahead.

- Fourth, to afford thought leaders a pragmatically optimistic worldview, able to sustain public conversations on the state of our planet without falling into the extreme views of naïve idealism or depressing despair.

Finally, I hope to articulate not just another theoretical model, but a heightened sensibility that we can live and practice in our daily lives and that can inform our work in the world, whatever paradigm or issue we happen to advocate. What’s at the heart of this Integral Optimism? Let’s find out....

History Repeats Itself

To begin, it’s worth remembering that the Integral, Evolutionary and other meta-systemic worldviews are not the first exciting new thought movements to be inspired with a compelling new vision, only to end up overestimating its effects. At the beginning of the 20th century, C.G. Jung and other notable leaders of the nascent depth psychology movement were powerfully moved by their brilliant new re-conceptualizations of the shadow. They believed that new psychological tools and excavations of those negative forces lurking within the human unconscious would not only be able to unearth and work through the worst within us as individuals, but also allow humanity as a whole to peacefully process (and thus liberate ourselves from) our most destructive tendencies. The world would no longer need to externalize and act out its inner psychic malevolence. While soon to be shocked by the First World

War, these pioneers nonetheless considered this to be merely a lingering aberration of the old ways—a ‘war to end all wars.’ Shortly thereafter, the much more destructive Second World War arrived, engendering depression in Jung for the remainder of his life. Theirs had been a hope gone wild.

When I offer this example to progressive groups, it is met with assurances that conditions were different in those days. They suggest that the psychoanalytic movement was insufficiently robust to account for and control what are otherwise unmanageable negative and aggressive impulses. Their theoretical models didn’t account for as much of reality as ours do today. Surely, nations are much more rational and truly democratic now. Well, one issue is beyond dispute: there are strikingly diverse ways that different progressive thinkers read and make meaning of history!

Without abandoning our extremely useful maps and mental models, how might we craft a more nuanced and sustainable understanding of the challenges we face today? Might we design an approach that represents a viable ‘both/and’ middle way without the extremes of utopian schemes or apocalyptic nightmares? A way that involves inspired optimism on the one hand and also includes what we know about the larger currents of history and evolution? How can we intelligently account for the good, the bad, and the ugly, the awe and the dread, and yet maintain a striving for ‘the good, the true and the beautiful?’

The Threat of Extinction and the Non-Dual Heart

“You are life... Life expresses itself as a flower, a human, an insight, and losing the insight. But life is not limited to its expression. If the whole world blew up, there would be no less life, just fewer manifestations. Life would still be there. You would still be there.”

– Adyashanti

Paradoxically, to find our center, it is necessary to face the extremes. What if the worst-case scenarios actually happen? What if global warming renders the Earth unlivable? Or what if resources wars for oil, water, and land escalate into a Third World War that ravages our species? Or what if the unintended consequences of new technologies destroy life as we know it, perhaps through some nanotech accident or AI uprising? What if...?

When we contemplate such possibilities, we can feel a constriction—a deep, primordial anxiety—in our heart space. Naturally, we *identify* with our lives, our species, our known reality, our world... and when we feel these threatened, even just in a thought experiment, it is fundamentally disturbing. But *is* this constricted, fearful sensation who we truly are?

Now, at this point, the obvious ‘spiritual’ answer is *no*—we’re something bigger, deeper, more luminous or divine; and so we can rest easy. Spirit is all there is, right? But let’s not go there just yet; let’s resist the urge for a ‘spiritual bypass’ around the painful experience. First, let’s reflect more deeply on our fundamental mortality and the unpredictable nature of the evolutionary process.

Not long ago a journalist asked the Dalai Lama what he’d been up to of late. The interviewer was unprepared for his response: “Preparing for death.” Picking up his dropped jaw, he was stopped ‘dead in his tracks,’ giving the cameraman a signal that the interview was over.

The Tibetans have a saying: “Death is certain. Time of death is uncertain.” For this reason they also have another saying:



gaia

“If one doesn’t meditate on death in the morning, one’s morning is wasted. If one doesn’t meditate on death in the afternoon, one’s afternoon is wasted. If one doesn’t meditate on death in the evening, one’s evening is wasted. In just this way, most people waste their entire lives.”

– Lama Anagarika Govinda

In our culture, it’s un-American to die. This is particularly so for our youth-worshipping Baby Boomer generation and its progeny. Even

though our spiritual explorations have embraced Eastern wisdom traditions now for decades—traditions that have an advanced relationship with death—we are still new to this game, and remain uncomfortable with this most ultimate of concerns. And yet, without facing—and emotionally integrating—the fact of our mortality, we will never authentically understand what lies beyond it.

This brings us to the spiritual heart of the matter: Beyond death is... Life! It may not involve the continuation of our individual separate selves; it may not be life as lived in the post-industrial moment of our 21st century human civilization; it may not be human life at all—but it is Life nonetheless. Our eternal nature is already Life itself and Life altogether. While it may be the nature of beings in the phenomenal world to arise, stay awhile, and then pass away, none of these manifestations—or their loss—has the least effect on who we truly are. Beyond relative appearances, we are most deeply Life itself. And yet, Life cannot be what it is—which is movement, change, becoming, endless transmutations of consciousness—without death ‘clearing the deck’ for its future manifestations. Death is an intimate and inevitable part of Life. Our mystical sensibility embraces these truths as self-evident. They invoke a sense of basic trust that the unfoldings of our world will always be anchored in the true identity of a larger Self that transcends the rounds of birth and death. Experiencing ourselves in our fundamental nature of Life/death allows us to explore a

Spectrum of Optimism



more complex, realistic, and ultimately hopeful perspective on who we truly are and the prospects of our larger destiny.

While we delight in the impressive comprehensiveness of our most robust of mental models, one of the most slippery shadows we face is situated at that tricky interface where our sense of hope intersects with the epic dangers of our day. They touch not just questions of personal or organizational development, or how we can become ‘all that we can be,’ but they also penetrate, disturb and reconfigure our very deepest essence and identity. In my experience, progressive thinkers tend to join the majority of mass culture by wanting to have faith in the assured continuance of the world as we know it. When invited to consider, from the place of relative luxury in which we now live, what a raw and lusty affair evolution has been, it feels natural to want to believe that we’re surely beyond all of that messy disruption now; so much more evolved than all of that.

I would like to propose that we question that assumption, and consider a range of more integrated attitudes towards our evolutionary future. How can we be optimistic, without denying either the real possibility of extinction or the deeper, spiritual reality of Life beyond death? What does this Integral Optimism look like?

The Spectrum of Optimism

Optimism is based on trust and the expectation that things are going to turn out well. It involves the belief that we will persevere against the slings and arrows of what can sometimes seem like outrageous fortune. It is said that while an optimist thinks that this is the best of all possible worlds, a pessimist fears that this is so. But there are different kinds of optimism, with different meanings, and it may be that both conventional pessimists and optimists can find common ground in a higher synthesis.

The Spectrum of Optimism can be thought of as a scale that exists within the conventional human views of reality, ranging from naïve optimism on the one hand, to a hopeless and apocalyptic pessimism on the other. ‘Integral Optimism’ extends the model to another level, which can act as a new foundation for both deep awareness and positive action.

Naïve Optimism (Extreme) At the extreme end of hope, the most powerful ally of naïve optimism is denial. Unsuspecting or credulous, this thought pattern lacks critical judgment when examining historical antecedents and patterns. It believes that bad things won’t happen if you don’t indulge in negative thoughts or feelings. Extreme examples are the downsides of movements like The Secret and Transcendental Meditation where the individual believes that good thoughts themselves are sufficient to move mountains without machinery.

Idealistic Optimism (Unstable) Less extreme is the belief that a certain doctrine or approach (e.g., neo-conservatism, Buddhism, liberalism, Christianity, Socialism, Deep Ecology, Integral) if successfully practiced can liberate the truth and the way. This approach is capable of phenomenal results, both good and bad. “With Integral consciousness, we will be able to successfully manage large scale catastrophes.” “If only everyone would get with this program, then the world’s problems could be solved.” This view assumes that we are safe, secure, and out of harm’s way in our protected Western world.

Inspired Optimism (Measured) The core of inspired optimism provides one of two components of Integral Optimism. It strives to create new worlds by challenging established maxims and reaching beyond what seems possible. The belief is that strong convictions, powerful purpose, and bold action give birth to new emergence, overcoming great odds. Examples are Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Jesus Christ, Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King Jr.

Cautious Optimism (Moderate) Individuals with cautious optimism see the glass as half full. They remain pragmatic while taking principled stands, commitments and actions. They hope for the best while prudently weighing options with restraint. They believe that although there will be setbacks, with some effort and good luck, they will hopefully recover.

Reserved Pessimism (Moderate) The glass is half empty. *Que sera, sera.* These people believe they have little agency to affect outcomes, good or bad. The world is full of forces often beyond their control. They are doubtful about the abilities of those in positions of power and authority to keep things running smoothly. While hoping for the best, they also tend to expect the worst.

Worried Pessimism (Measured) Often preoccupied with bad news from the media, these people experience life from a victim perspective and look for wide-ranging evidence that things are going from bad to worse. Always on the defense, they show little hope of things improving, reject any information that would disconfirm a dark outlook, and take few risks that might otherwise alter their condition.

Paranoid Pessimism (Unstable) A paranoid pessimist believes that pernicious shadow forces—both seen and unseen—are usually conspiring to do harm and that events will inevitably degenerate into large-scale destruction. As Einstein said, “I don’t know

what weapons we will use in WW3, but they will be sticks and stones in WW4.” There is some sense that we may survive but things will be much worse.

Apocalyptic Pessimism (Extreme) These individuals believe that the human condition is a blight on Gaia. We have demonstrated with warfare and weaponry, as well as raping our planet and other species, that we are fundamentally an aggressive and savage species. We are unfit to lead the planet and have doomed ourselves to destroy all life forms on this Earth.

Integral Optimism Integral Optimism is a hybrid of two contradictory yet complementary opposites—*striving* toward high expectations AND *surrender* to the mystery of existence. The striving appears as the ‘unreasonable without being unrealistic’ sense of possibility found in inspirational optimists. For example, John F. Kennedy targeted the moon. This required an ‘unreasonable’ amount of purpose, expertise, ingenuity, and Herculean effort, but it was also scientifically possible. Realistically ambitious Integral Optimists are inspired by a visionary sense of purpose and thus *strive* to be the change in their world.

The second element of Integral Optimism is *surrender*. This is ultimately a surrender into deeper Life itself—beyond our separate-self sense. It also embodies an impulse of self-transformation, which is only possible by dying to a more limited sense of self. This type of ‘wise surrender’ recognizes that there are rightful times even for Shiva—Lord of Transformation and Death—to be the energy of fundamental change.

Combining the opposites of *striving* and *surrender*, we arrive at a place that is at once sober, spiritually grounded, positively engaged, ‘unreasonably’ ambitious, and yet realistic and open to whatever may come.

Integral Optimism and Our Global Future

Can we be Integrally Optimistic about the future of our species and the planet?

Howard Bloom, author of *Global Brain*, provides us with a test case. He tells a story of a possible future that includes both the likelihood of major disruptions (necessitating ‘surrender’), along with our ability to overcome them (requiring our ‘striving’).

Bloom believes that since life began in microbial form 3.5 billion years ago, evolution has been morphing and adapting into the

present via a number of complex interactions of five interwoven energies. These energies, or principles, dictate survival and development, and are the interactive elements that constitute the social-networking and information-processing dimensions of the collective learning machine that is the ‘Global Brain.’

The first principle is ‘Conformity Enforcement’—the value of standardizing codes of belief and expectation. Balancing this is ‘Diversity Generation’—the need to innovate and adapt to shifting life conditions. This is assisted then by the third component, ‘Inner Judges,’ which reinforce adaptive choices by powerful feedback mechanisms. The fourth principle, ‘Resource Shifters,’ appropriates energy and attention toward successful dynamics. Finally, ‘Intergroup Tournaments’ involve competitions that demand radical innovations in order for a group to survive and thrive. If a life form cannot meet the challenges of these 5 energies, it is maladaptive and disappears.

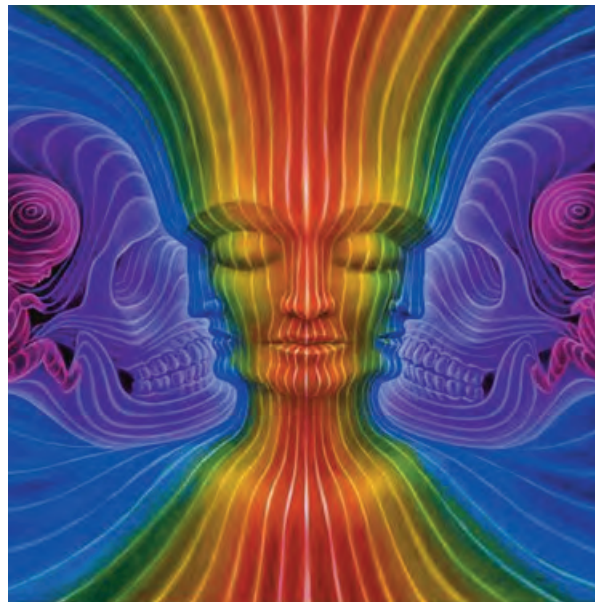
Bloom argues that this meta-system of energies has allowed the global brain to be wildly successful in moving evolution along to its current level. Most importantly for our discussion is the energy of *intergroup tournaments*. From an evolutionary perspective, crises such as we are experiencing are a sign that something has gone wrong. Intergroup tournaments are there to not only clear the air, but are also laden with consequences; even conflict

and carnage contain the seeds of the next competitive advantage.

Bloom understands that there is an evolutionary tendency toward coalescing cooperative consciousness in the service of optimal adaptive functioning so that disruptions are minimized—in a word: peace. Yet peace tends to come at a high cost. As someone who has keenly observed the patterns of history, Bloom is inspirationally optimistic, even while cautioning us about being naively (or idealistically) optimistic by imagining that we will be able to prematurely transcend some of the necessary intergroup tournaments that may be waiting to evolve us to our future higher selves.

Balancing Striving and Surrender—a Call for a New Heroism

The time ahead promises to be challenging on many fronts. While an Integral Optimist may find comfort in his or her understanding of complex system dynamics, ultimately the value of their optimism will be found where the rubber meets the road, in gestures and actions large and small, visible and more intimate. Integral Optimism calls on us to be heroes in a more robust sense than may be popularly understood. We cannot be merely the cartoon superhero who makes everything all right in all circumstances, nor the martyr whose sacrifice justifies their escape from a painful world.



InterBeing

The Integral hero is neither *desperately* striving to maintain a familiar and comforting status quo, nor *fatalistically* surrendering to impersonal forces without affirming any sort of agency. In 'striving surrender,' the Integral Optimist combines two kinds of heroism:

Sustaining Heroism: Striving to maintain, enhance, and protect the good, true, and beautiful as it already exists in this world.

Resilient Heroism: Surrendering and letting go into transforming release; then emerging into recovery, regeneration, and revitalization of new life.

The conscious practice of sustaining and resilient heroism can nourish those of us who will fight the good fight in the yet unimagined 'intergroup tournaments' ahead. It can fortify us as we undergo further ordeals of adaptation on this churning planet. As Life itself, we have been participating in these heroics for millions of years. Integral Optimism galvanizes us to move forward with confidence, as it reassures that ultimately, Life always wins. Moreover, evolutionary history evidences increasingly greater incidence rates of goodness truth and beauty as Life has evolved into the current wonder as *Homo Sapiens*.

Thus, we are called to appreciate the core value in Shiva (Death and Destruction), as much as in Brahman and Vishnu (Creation and Preservation). Does the course of evolution not suggest that the forces of birth, life and death shall conspire to grow us into the destinies of *Homo Empathicus*, *Homo Paradoxicus*, *Homo Spiritualis*... ?

Our striving surrender is about maintaining our connection with the heart amidst the mayhem, realizing that wherever we go and whatever life conditions we may encounter, we are always animated fundamentally as Life itself. The relative 'endings' of physical death will never separate us from the infinite and eternal Life that we Are. Our future is put in proper perspective at the place where a fierce fidelity to the gritty grace of striving is surrendered to our better angels who will guide our next evolutionary iteration—once again, as new Life.

Let us be aware of ourselves as unique, individual manifestations of Life as we breathe in, and remember our always-already Unity as we exhale....



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Kosmos Treks to the Ancient Kingdom of Mustang

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